DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 315 945 EC 222 095

AUTHOR Wolfle, Jane; Southern, W. Thomas
TITLE Teachers' Assessment of Preschool and Primary Giftedness.
PUB DATE 89
NOTE 22p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ability Identification; Creativity; *Gifted; Preschool Education; Primary Education; *Student Characteristics; *Talent; *Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Background; Teaching Experience; Young Children

ABSTRACT

This study examined traits considered most important in identifying giftedness in young children, as reported by teachers of preschool and primary grades. Sixty-six teachers in northwest Ohio and Virginia responded to a questionnaire listing items in the following categories: cognitive, personality, physical, creativity, talent, and social. Questionnaire items consisted of characteristics, traits, and behaviors both frequently associated with giftedness and having low correlation to giftedness. Results showed that teachers' experience and training made little difference in the characteristics valued, though responses were differentiated by age level taught. Cognitive traits were rated as more indicative of giftedness than any other group of traits, though teachers also seemed aware of traits that are often linked to creativity. Traits associated with talents were not widely cited or highly rated by the respondents. Teachers of preschool children valued personality traits and social development more than teachers of primary students. Four tables and 28 references are attached. (JDD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED315945

Teachers' Assessment of Preschool and Primary Giftedness

Jane Wolfle

Department of Educational Foundations and Inquiry

W. Thomas Southern

Department of Special Education

Room 451 Education Building

Bowling Green State University

Bowling Green, OH 43403

(419) 372-7293

running head: PRESCHOOL G/T ASSESSMENT

EC 222095

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
J. Wolfle
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Abstract

This study examined the traits of young children considered most important by teachers of preschool and primary grades for identifying giftedness. The traits often associated with gifted children, as well as traits often mistakenly ascribed to this group were presented in a survey to 66 teachers of preschool, kindergarten and grades 1 and 2. The results indicated that experience and training made little difference in the characteristics valued by the respondents, though age level taught did differentiate responses. The teachers reported greater reliance on cognitive indicators and less recognition of traits associated with creativity or performing arts. Implications for identification and programming for young gifted children are discussed.

Teachers' Assessment of Preschool and Primary Giftedness

The study of gifted preschool and/or primary children is beginning to attract the attention of educators. The major emphasis of professional journals has been to articles directed toward identification and programming for the gifted school age children - generally those in third grade or higher. The relative paucity of literature on giftedness among pre-school age children may have reflected difficulties in the selection and application of appropriate instruments for identification. It might have also been occasioned by the lack of large numbers of preschoolers in educational programs.

Social changes in the last several years, including the increase in the number of working parents and single parent families, however, have occasioned opportunities for formal education for many more pre-school children. In addition, the last twenty years has witnessed the efficacy of early intervention with various high risk populations. This trend, capped by the passage of PL 99-457, has also begun to accelerate interest in provisions for meeting the needs of gifted children at the preschool and early primary level.

The movement toward recognition of and early intervention with gifted young children has been based on three issues. First there is a growing recognition that current options at the preschool and primary level may not serve the needs of this population, and may, indeed, result in the underdevelopment of potential ability (Whitmore, 1979; Davis & Rimm, 1988). Second, the lack of adequate programmatic response for young children may be of greatest impact on the economically disadvantaged child, deprived of a wide array of options available to middle and upper class students (Southern & Spicker, in press). Third, evidence has begun to accumulate that appropriate curriculum opportunities can benefit all children in the preschool or primary

setting. Parke & Ness (1988) have recently pointed out the importance of these early years for gifted children and the necessity of having a curriculum planned specifically for them. Karnes & Johnson (1987) found that providing a special training program for Head Start teachers and youngsters thought to be gifted helped all of the children in the program make academic and social gains. After identifying strengths of the children, the teachers were taught specific ways to encourage thinking and problem solving skills. With few programs available specifically for gifted preschoolers, this finding has strong implications for all programs for young children.

Current Identification Practice with Young Children

Studies on identification of young gifted children have generally concentrated on the cognitive traits that are believed to characterize this population. Intelligence tests like the Stanford-Binet or the Wechsler Scales are most often used to identify students for early intervention programs (Kitano & Delon, 1988). These measures are, however, expensive and time consuming. Moreover, the reliability and long term predictive validity of IQ tests for young children is questionable (Tannenbaum, 1983). Critics have also pointed out the potential shortcomings of these measures in the identification of other facets of giftedness (e.g. Sternberg, 1981; Gardner, 1982).

Studies that examine other areas of potential giftedness or talent are rare and report diverse and contradictory results (Lupkowski, 1989). The appearance of potential talent in the visual or performing arts, leadership or creativity has been studied infrequently with this age group. Some theorists have expressed pessimism about identification of areas such as visual arts in early childhood (Clark & Zimmerman, 1984). Nor is specific academic aptitude assessment well developed. The dearth of appropriate aptitude and achievement measures for this population preclude all but the most precocious children.

Robinson, Roedell, and Jackson (1978) report that some early assessment of talent and interest can be accomplished with very young children(as early as one year old in some cases). Their sample was, however, very precocious, as measured by traditional ability measures (e.g. Stanford-Binet). Such a selection procedure reflects a limited view of giftedness. The applicability to other populations of gifted children could be questioned.

In addition, this research, as well as many other studies that describe characteristics of gifted young children suffer from a methodological concern. Their conclusions from these studies are derived from intact groups already identified as gifted. Characteristics derived this way may arise from the method of selection rather than from the inherent traits of giftedness. For example, there is ample evidence that reliance on standardized testing results in identification of a large population of economically advantaged students. Any traits generalized from this group may, thus, result from SES rather than innate ability.

Alternate Identification Sources

If recognition and programming for more varied traits of giftedness and talents among young children is to continue, other instruments and procedures will be necessary. One potential source for this information is to involve the parents of the children in the identification procedure.

Parents have the most extensive contact with children, and may have a wealth of anecdotal information germane to making placement decisions (Silverman, 1986). Haensly (1988) also found that parents are quite accurate in observing and then reporting the abilities of their children. However, parents are generally not able to provide information about the relative performance of children. Futhermore, they frequently do not make common interpretations of the characteristics and traits listed on many rating lists. What is a long attention span? An advanced vocabulary? Or what exactly is

implied by early reading ability? Even something as basic as the age at which a child learns to talk can be misinterpreted. Is talking one word or a sentence?

Teachers If the pattern established with older populations is followed, much of the responsibility for screening and rating performances of young children will fall to teachers working with these students in the classroom. Many districts and preschools will turn to staff members to provide information about the performances of young children. Although the technical validity of teacher ratings have been brought into question (Pegnatto & Birch, 1959; Gear, 1976), most gifted programs solicit information from teachers (Richert, Alvino, & McDonnel, 1982). Indeed, support for use of teacher ratings has recently been growing. Gear (1978) described empirical results that specially trained teachers could reliably identify students with high individual IQs. Renzulli and Delcourt (1986) questioned conclusions advanced by critics of teacher accuracy. In most of the studies that indicted teachers' ability to identify gifted children, individual IQ scores were used as the criterion for successful identification. However, if a wider, multifaceted view of giftedness is adopted, it is also possible that teachers recognize abilities not assessed by the IQ test. In such instances, teachers could provide valuable information about students underpredicted by traditional cognitive measures.

Sources of Validity and Reliability Errors in Teacher Nomination

Generally, efforts to solicit teacher input presents checklists or rating scales to teachers for assessment of students. The characteristics lists developed from research with older populations might be inappropriate. A number of researchers in gifted education have developed checklists tailored to the early childhood population (Karnes, 1978; Schwedel & Stoneburner, 1978;

Kitano & Kirby, 1986). These lists, though developed by professionals familiar with gifted preschool behavior, are often used by teachers and parents who define the characteristics in many different ways.

When a teacher applies the checklists to various students, there is often a history of performance that has shaped teacher judgement about that student. To date, any information available about teacher judgement has been gleaned primarily from studies of teacher judgement with older populations. Nonetheless, it is possible to speculate that some of the same types of errors might accrue.

One source of error in teacher nomination arises from presuppositions about what behaviors might predict potential giftedness. These assumptions may conflict with existing research literature about characteristics of gifted children in general and young gifted children in particular (Richert, Alvino & McDonnell, 1982). There are a large number of myths about what constitutes giftedness prevalent among educators including a view that precocity is an essential prerequisite for future gifted performance; that all gifted students are highly verbal, or that gifted children universally exhibit extended attention spans (Richert et al. 1982). The extent to which teachers involved in identification and assessment adhere to these can reduce the validity of their ratings, especially in relation to young children, whose thinking, physical development and social skills are qualitatively very different from the older students.

Teachers may also be swayed negatively by traits exhibited by some gifted children. Richert et al. (1982) lists 8 behaviors associated with giftedness that are viewed as highly undesirable by teachers. For example, creatively gifted students may be disorganized, may appear off task, and may question

traditional values. Resistance to authority and resistance to classroom exercises that are not viewed by the student as meaningful have been associated with students with high cognitive ability. Confronted with these characteristics, a teacher might resist the assessment of giftedness for such a child.

The experience of the teacher in the classroom, and with the age group being rated, may have an impact on the quality of the resulting assessment. Hanninen (1988) reported that differences between experienced and novice teachers in older grades were obtained with experienced teachers performing more effectively in identifying gifted children. Support was also reported for results of prior studies that linked training in gifted education with increased accuracy for teacher nomination (Gear, 1978). It might be inferred also that lack of experience might also include lack of experience in the age group currently being assessed. Because of differences in behaviors of very young children from that of older students, extensive experience with upper grade students may not be relevant for assessing younger students.

The differences in the demands of various settings in which children operate, and the varying behaviors they exhibit may cause further difficulty for teachers assessing giftedness. Preschool teachers may look for widely different performances to key judgements of student potential than do teachers at the elementary level. Substantial differences would require that rating and observation instruments be sensitive to the age grade level being assessed.

A related issue arises in examining whether there are traits that are viewed as so important that they are prerequisites to identification. Little is known about the relative importance teachers assign to individual characteristics. Lists of characteristics are often quite lengthy, and they may include traits related to several areas of giftedness. If teachers view

some characteristics as necessary characteristics of giftedness, the remainder of the characteristics might be examined and rated less carefully. The result could be that the identification becomes skewed to certain types of giftedness, or even biased toward characteristics that are not highly related to ability in some performance areas.

Even when teachers are trained, the validity of the results especially for young children must by measured by the extent and frequency of purposive observations of behavior. Single observation settings may not provide an accurate description of student abilities. Very young children are in a period of rapid growth and development. Skills and abilities may not appear consistently or in narrow periods of observation. Unless screening for behaviors and traits are conducted continuously, over large spans of time, it is possible that key behaviors may be missed.

Goals of the Study

The present study was planned to begin the process of answering the question of what teachers recognize as advanced behavior in young children. Teachers of preschool, kindergarten, and first grade were sent questionnaires to discover not only the areas that they see as indications of advanced understanding, but also to see if the areas that they identify vary from grade level to grade level. There have been studies that have shown that training teachers to encourage thinking skills does improve scores earned by disadvantaged children (Karnes & Johnson, 1987). Might this also be true for training gifted children at the preschool/primary level? Do teachers working with gifted preschool children have consistent definitions of gifted behaviors? To what extent do teachers' perceptions reveal accurate information about characteristics highly related to later giftedness? If able to do so, is this awareness due more to the experience or due to training and

education? To begin to answer these questions it is necessary to first find out if there are differences in teachers' perceptions of giftedness.

Subjects

One hundred fifty-six teachers working with preschool, kindergarten, first, or second grade students in Northwest Ohio and Virginia were selected because of their previous association with education programs directed toward young children.

Method

Each subject was mailed a survey and asked to respond to a series of 56 Likert scale questions. Items for the scale consisted of characteristics, traits, and behaviors frequently associated with gifted children derived from several widely used checklists (e.g. Renzulli et al., 1976; Clark, 1983) for older gifted children. The traits and behaviors were modified to apply to younger children. Some characteristics were included that have low to zero level correlation to giftedness or later achievement, e.g., "is neat"; "always follows directions" (Richert et al., 1982). Respondents were asked at the end of the questionnaire to list: (a) the three characteristics they thought most indicative of giftedness, (b) the three traits least indicative of giftedness and (c) traits not mentioned that they felt were important. Teachers were asked to report on the level at which they were currently employed, other levels at which they had worked, years of experience in current and other placements, and educational level (and area studied) achieved.

Results

Sixty-six (43.3 percent) teachers responded to the questionnaire. Item responses were analyzed and a reliability estimate for the scale was generated (Cronbach alpha = .837). Teacher responses were scored and analyzed with

questions that had the highest (very important) and lowest (least important) item means presented in Table 1. The most frequently occurring, open-ended responses as to which of the items were most and least important in diagnosing a bright or talented child are presented in Table 2.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The 56 items of the scale were grouped into a series of categories a) Cognitive Traits, b) Personality Traits, c) Physical Traits, d) Creativity Traits, e) Talent Area Traits, and f) Social Traits. Responses to these categories are presented in Table 3. In addition, responses by teachers were compared in these six areas using two-tailed T-tests on the basis of current grade taught, years of experience at that grade, and whether or not the respondent had a degree in early childhood education. Significant differences were noted for years of experience in responding to creativity and social traits; and for current grade taught, significance was approached on physical traits. No significant differences were noted for a degree in early childhood. Comparison means, standard deviations, and t values for significant differences are reported in Table 4.

INSERT TABLES 2,3,4 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

Respondents tended to rate characteristics that have low association with giftedness or talent. The lowest rated questions included physical size, neatness, and popularity. Overall ratings of physical factors were low. Cognitive traits were rated as more indicative of giftedness than any other group of traits, though teachers also seemed aware of traits that are often

linked to creativity. Traits incidentally associated with creativity such as rebelliousness or resistance to authority were seldom seen as indicative of giftedness. In one sense this is a justifiable conclusion, since they were asked to note characteristics that gave positive indications of giftedness. A difficulty would arise for identification only if teachers would tend to reject students from identification for creativity if they showed negative personality traits.

Traits that have been associated with talents were not widely cited or highly rated by the respondents, though directions were included that specifically requested the respondents to consider characteristics that would point to musical or art abilities. It is possible that such a diagnosis is difficult for this population of students. On the other hand, it may mean that teachers value cognitive and creative abilities in school type settings more than visual and performing arts abilities.

It was surprising to find few differences for grade level taught, experience, and early childhood education. Teachers of preschool children are a bit less skeptical about the value of personality traits and social development than peers who teach primary age students. They are also a bit more negative about the value of physical development for such diagnoses.

Conclusion

The results of this survey must be viewed as preliminary. Responses from greater numbers of teachers at each grade level, and from a wider geographic background would need to be analyzed before results could be generalized. However, the results obtained do provide some clues as to the state of the respondents' knowledge and attitudes toward characteristics that might trigger identification of a student as bright.

For the most part teachers of kindergarten and primary children are aware

of the cognitive traits that the literature has shown to indicate giftedness, and they indicate that they recognize that physical size does not have a lot to do with giftedness. An important difference, albeit small, was found in the indication that teachers having taught five or more years see less importance in both social and personality traits. This finding is consistent with the findings of Howell & Bressler (1988) which found a significant correlation with years of teaching gifted and more cognitive based teaching styles while showing a significant negative correlation with the sensing-feeling teaching style. This trend seems to also be true for the sample of teachers of younger students. Young children are very social, and learn about their acceptance in the world through their interactions with people. Because children learn early to value or not value school, often based on how they are made to feel about themselves, educators must continue to examine how teachers assess children's abilities and how we communicate this assessment to the children.

Given the results of the present study it would be beneficial to see how teachers are actually identifying and responding to gifted preschoolers. It may then be possible to make suggestions to insure that what is known about preschoolers is utilized in the effort to identify potentially gifted preschoolers. Mitchell (1988) presented some concerns in finding culturally different gifted preschoolers that might well be appropriately used for all young children. In one sense, all young children are culturally different since they differ from adult, middle class culture. First, expand the notion to include all children in the observation would provide insight into behaviors that might otherwise be overlooked. Second, carry out observations over a number of weeks, or months, will allow the teacher to discover the

patterns of development and abilities. Third, provide observations sheets for the teacher to use in assessing children's behavior. young children's behavior is not as consistent as behavior seen in older children, and observing children only once or twice provides too many opportunities to miss examples of sequences indicative of advanced reasoning.

Kitano (1985) has shown that observing gifted preschoolers over time results in their demonstrating frequent, but not constant, instances of behaviors of advanced knowledge, creativity, social maturity, and thinking skills. Much of the time, however, the gifted young child demonstrates behaviors very consistent with his/her chronological age. A three year old is always a three year old. The observance of everyday activities over time allows for a much better representation of a child's abilities to be seen. It is known that if you give preschoolers a choice of 3 or 4 activities they will most often select the activity that is the most developmentally correct (Parke & Ness, 1988).

What is needed at this point in understanding gifted preschool/primary children is the observation of what is actually happening within classrooms. Only when observations and assessments provide accurate indications of ability is it possible to appropriately encourage the strengths of young children.

References

Clark, B. (1983). Growing Up Gifted (2nd ed.). Columbus, OH:Charles E. Merrill

Clark, G. & Zimmerman, E. (1984) Educating artistically talented students. Syracuse, NY; Syracuse University Press.

Davis, G.A. & Rimm, S.B. (1988). Education of the gifted and talented. Englewood Cliffs, NJ; Prentice-Hall.

Gardner, H. Art, mind, and brain. New York; Basic Books.

Gear, G.H. (1978). Effects of training on teacher's accuracy in the identification of gifted children. Gifted Child Quarterly, 22:90-97.

Haensly, P. (1988). Validating parent-provided information in identification of preschool giftedness. Paper presented at annual conference of the National Association for Gifted Children. Orlando, Fl, November, 1988.

Hanninen, G. (1988). A study of teacher training in gifted education. Roeper Review, 10(3), 139-144.

Howell, H.,& Bressler, J. (1988). Research on teaching styles of teachers of the gifted. Roeper Review, 10(3), 144-146.

Karnes, M., & Johnson, L. (1987). Bringing out Head Start talents: Findings from the field. Gifted Child Quarterly, 31(4), 174-179.

Karnes, M.B. (Ed.). (1978). The underserved: Our young gifted children. Reston, VA: ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children.

Kitano, M., & DeLeon, J. (1988). Use of the Stanford Binet fourth edition in identifying young gifted children. Roeper Review, 10(3), 156-159

Kitano, M.K., & Kirby, D.F. (1986). Gifted education: A comprehensive view. Boston: Little, Brown & Co.

Kitano, M. (1985). Ethnography of a preschool for the gifted: What gifted young children actually do. Gifted Child Quarterly, 29(2), 67-71.

Lupkowski, A. (1989). Growing up, growing older: Social and emotional needs. Roeper Review, 11(3), 124-127

Maker, J. (1975). Training teachers of the gifted and talented: A comparison of models. Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children.

Mitchell, B. (1988). A strategy for the identification of the culturally different gifted/talented child. Roeper Review, 10(3), 163-165.

Parke, B., & Ness, P. (1988). Curricular decision-making for the education of young gifted children. Gifted Child Quarterly, 32(1), 196-199.

Pegnatto, C.W. & Birch, J.W. (1959). Locating gifted children in junior high school: A comparison of methods. Exceptional Children, 23:300-304.

Renzulli, J.S. & Delcourt, M.A. (1986). The legacy and logic of research on the identification of gifted persons. Gifted Child Quarterly, 30: 20-23.

Renzulli, J.S., Smith, L.H., White, A.J., Callahan, C.M. & Hartman, R.K.(1976). Scales for rating the behavioral characteristics of superior students. Mansfield Center CN; Creative Learning Press.

Richert, E.S., Alvino, J., & McDonnell, R.C. (1982) National report on identification: Assessment and recommendation for comprehensive identification of gifted and talented youth. Sewell, NJ: Education Improvement Center-South.

Robinson, H.B., Roedell, W.C. & Jackson, N.E. (1978). Early identification and intervention. In A.H.Passow (ed.), The gifted and talented. Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education.

Schwedel, A.M., & Stoneburner, R. (1978). Identification. In M.B.Karnes (Ed.), The underserved: Our young gifted children. Reston, VA: ERIC Clearinghouse on Handicapped and Gifted Children.

Silverman, L.K. (1986). Young gifted children: Can parents identify giftedness? Topics in Early Childhood Special Education. 6:23-38.

Southern, W.T. & Spicker H.H. (In press) County line and poverty line: Economically disadvantaged and rural gifted young children. In R. Blocksom & J. Smutny (eds.), Young Gifted Children. D.O.K. Publishing.

Sternberg, R.J. (1981). A componential theory of intellectual giftedness. Gifted Child Quarterly, 25:86-93.

Tannenbaum, A.J. (1983). Gifted children: Psychological and educational perspectives. New York; Macmillan

Whitmore, J.R. (1979). The etiology of underachievement in highly gifted young children. Journal for the Education of the Gifted, 3:38-51.

Table 1

Highest/Lowest Items Means

Items With Highest Item Means

1. Understands abstract concepts
2. Has an ability to generate unusual comparisons and categorizations
3. Learning is exceptionally rapid
4. Possesses insight into cause and effect relations
5. Possesses a large storehouse of information
6. Chooses advanced or challenging activities and hobbies

Items With Lowest Item Means

1. Hates physical activity
2. Is large for age
3. Is neat
4. Is rebellious
5. Is well liked by classmates
6. Prefers to sit and watch before engaging in games or activities
7. Seems to shift from interest to interest rapidly

Table 2

Most Frequently Cited Open-end Responses

Most Likely Indicators of Giftedness

1. Understands abstract concepts
2. Is curious
3. Reads, and was self taught
4. Learning is exceptionally rapid
5. Has an ability to generate unusual comparisons and categorizations
6. Possesses insight into cause and effect relations
7. Possesses a large storehouse of information
8. Has diverse, frequently self-directed activities
9. Is highly imaginative

Least Likely Indicators of Giftedness

1. Is large for age
2. Hates physical activity
3. Is neat
4. Can count to 10
5. Is well liked by classmates
6. Is rebellious
7. Has advanced gross motor development
8. Possesses letter recognition and other pre-reading skills

Table 3

Means for Area Trait Scores

	N	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION
Cognitive	63	3.012	.321
Social	63	2.362	.443
Personality	63	2.367	.385
Talent Area	63	2.529	.458
Physical	63	1.837	.399
Creativity	63	3.006	.513

Table 4

Significant Differences on Trait Rating

	N	MEAN	SD	T	df	ALPHA
PHYSICAL TRAITS						
Current Grade						
Teaching PreK - K	33	1.742	.073	-1.981	64	p=.052
Primary	33	1.939	.068			
SOCIAL TRAITS						
Yrs. Exp. 5	19	2.593	.369	2.624	64	p=.012
Yrs. Exp. 5	47	2.298	.508			
PERSONALITY TRAITS						
Yrs. Exp. 5	19	2.514	.325	2.185	64	p=.035
Yrs. Exp. 5	47	2.307	.402			

mrb/TAPAPG/ts6